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ABSTRACT

The term "employability skills" refers to those skills required to acquire and retain a job. In the past, employability skills were considered primarily of a vocational or job-specific nature; they were not thought to include the academic skills most commonly taught in schools. Current thinking, however, has broadened the definition to include not only many foundational academic skills, but also a variety of attitudes and habits. Recent usage of the term has described the preparation of foundational skills upon which a person must build job-specific skills. These skills include: communication, personal and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and management of organizational processes. Ever growing numbers of employers are assessing these skills, primarily in reading and mathematics, prior to hiring. However, educators still show greater interest in employability skills assessment than do employers. Several efforts at employability assessment are discussed. When selecting an approach for assessing employability skills, the following criteria must be kept in mind: (1) the assessment must clearly mirror the nature of the skill required; (2) the skill assessed should be teachable; and (3) each assessment must be evaluated in the context of its purpose. (JBJ)

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Assessing Employability Skills

by Thomas H. Saterfiel and Joyce R. McLarty

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Assessing Employability Skills

Thomas H. Saterfiel and Joyce R. McLarty

The term *employability skills* refers to those skills required to acquire and retain a job. In the past, employability skills were considered to be primarily of a vocational or job-specific nature; they were not thought to include the academic skills most commonly taught in the schools. Current thinking, however, has broadened the definition of employability skills to include not only many foundational academic skills, but also a variety of attitudes and habits.

In fact, in recent usage, the term *employability skills* is often used to describe the preparation or foundational skills upon which a person must build job-specific skills (i.e., those that are unique to specific jobs). Among these foundational skills are those which relate to communication, personal and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and management of organizational processes (Lankard, 1990). Employability skills in this sense are valued because they apply to many jobs and so can support common preparation to meet the needs of many different occupations.

The concept of employability skills originated with educators, primarily those working on programs specifically designed to facilitate employment (e.g., vocational rehabilitation, Job Training Partnership Act). Employers, although the primary determiners of the skills that will actually enable an individual to acquire and retain a job, have traditionally focused on job-specific skills (e.g., those needed to spot weld or prepare a sales report). Assessments for employment, where used, most frequently have consisted of general ability and personality tests supplemented by job-specific assessments (e.g., work samples).

In recent years, that picture has changed dramatically with ever growing numbers of employers assessing foundational skills, primarily in reading and mathematics, prior to hiring (Greenburg, Canzoneri, and Straker, 1994). This is probably due to the joint effects of an increasing demand for these skills on the job and employer dissatisfaction with the levels of those skills demonstrated by applicants. Even today, however, educators show greater interest in employability skills assessment than do employers. This is possibly due to employer concerns about the legal implications of any assessment that might have adverse impact (a detrimental effect on hiring rates) on gender or ethnic minority groups (Uniform Guidelines, 1978).

Much of the current impetus to teach and assess employability skills results from concerns about this country's ability to compete in the world economy. Seminal work by Carnevale (Carnevale, Garner, and Meltzer, 1990) was followed by efforts by both public and private agencies to address the strongly felt need to improve the work-related skills of those entering the workforce. The work begun by the Department of Labor and its Secretary's Commission on Attaining Necessary Skills (SCANS) is continuing, with plans to validate the skills they identified (U.S. Department of Labor, SCANS, 1992). Development of assessments for these skills will follow this effort.

American College Testing's Center for Education and Work, through its Work Keys System, has developed large-scale assessments for seven employability skill areas: Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, Listening, Writing, Locating Information, Applied Technology, and Teamwork. Assessments for additional skill areas are currently in development (American College Testing, 1994). The state of Ohio combined its job-specific Ohio Compentency Assessment Program (OCAP) tests with the Work Keys assessments for a comprehensive assessment of foundational and specialized skills. The state of Tennessee is involving its high school seniors in the Work Keys System to help it meet the employability skills needs of all its students.

Other notable efforts include the C^3 project in Fort Worth, Texas (Fort Worth Independent School District, 1992) and the portfolio development and evaluation undertaken by the state of Michigan (Michigan Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, 1992). These projects are distinguished by extensive use of business input for development and implementation. Although neither of these projects currently offers assessments for use by outside agencies, both are sources of valuable information on the development of employability skills.

Of the many other efforts to provide employability skills assessments, the largest group focus on the basic literacy level, as did the earliest work on employability skills. Educational Testing Service, building on the work of the National Adult Literacy Study funded by the U.S. Department of Education, publishes tests measuring

lower-level reading, mathematics, and document literacy. Additionally, tests once used only for assessing lower-level adult skills for academic purposes have now also been pressed into service to meet the growing demand for employability skills assessment (e.g., TABE, CASAS).

When selecting an approach for assessing employability skills, several criteria must be kept in mind. First, the validity of an employability skills assessment rests on job analysis: a clear and validated relationship should exist between the assessment and the skills required for one or more jobs. This relationship should be based on a systematic analysis of the skills and skill levels required for the job(s) in question. It is not sufficient to observe, for example, that "reading" is required for the job; one must know which tasks require reading and the type and level of reading skill needed. The assessment must clearly mirror the nature of the skill required, and the score attained on it must accurately reflect the examinee's level of that skill.

Second, the skill assessed should be teachable. Assessment of "intrinsic abilities" is valuable both for employers attempting to predict future job performance and for counselors working with students to identify jobs suited to their interests, values, and self-concepts. However, the essence of employability skills is preparation for the job, so the focus of employability skills assessments should be directed to those aspects of the relevant skills that can be taught. Since not all employability skills can be neatly packaged in the traditional academic disciplines, educators must make special efforts to ensure that they teach all the needed employability skills.

The degree to which preparation for the workforce (i.e., employability skills development) and preparation for postsecondary education are congruous has been under considerable discussion. It is too early to determine whether integrated preparation for both provides as good a preparation for each as separate programs or, if not, at what point in a student's career separate programs should begin. Institutions using separate programs for preparation generally begin that differentiation at grade 10 or 11.

Finally, each assessment must be evaluated in the context of its purpose. If employers are going to use the scores to make personnel decisions, the employability skills assessment must meet strict reliability and validity standards, sufficient to provide a sound legal defense. This requires painstaking attention to the psychometric quality of the instrument, to the standardization of the administration, and to the accuracy of the scoring. However, if the purpose of the assessment is to guide instruction, relevant psychometric criteria are more relaxed. The advantage of assessments which employers may use for personnel decisions is that the results are of immediate use to the examinees in making the transition to the workforce. The advantage of assessments used only for low-stakes purposes is that they may be constructed with greater emphasis on providing instructionally relevant experiences to students. It is also important to recognize that assessment instruments are needed to support the information needs both of school-age students as they enter the workforce and of adults making transitions into, or within, the workforce at later stages in their lives.

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